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SOUTH AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL SCIENCE FICTION?
MISCEGENATION IN *APOCALYPSE NOW NOW*, BY CHARLIE HUMAN

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ABSTRACT: The novel *Apocalypse Now Now*, written by the South African author Charlie Human, tells the story of Baxter Zevcenko, a teenager whose girlfriend has gone missing. While trying to find her, Baxter discovers that he is the great-great-grandchild of an evil English magistrate with the ability to time travel (Kobus “Mirth” Basson) and of a destitute Afrikaner housemaid with supernatural abilities (Ester van Rensburg). Baxter additionally learns that, to travel through time, Mirth uses one of two exoskeletons, which are simultaneously the cages and the vehicles of two alien brothers, shaped as a mantis and an octopus. Clearly a science fictional novel, although it also employs the supernatural, *Apocalypse Now Now* could be characterized as a postcolonial novel, given its presentation of silenced voices. Nevertheless, the novel also focuses on some of the same racist concerns that characterized colonialism, specifically miscegenation. Therefore, this article will argue that, despite displaying a postcolonial dimension, *Apocalypse Now Now* additionally possesses what could be considered a neocolonial character – hence the question posed in the title of this article.

Keywords: science fiction, postcolonialism, South Africa, Second Anglo-Boer War, miscegenation.

RESUMO: O romance *Apocalypse Now Now*, escrito pelo autor sul-africano Charlie Human, conta a história de Baxter Zevcenko, um adolescente cuja namorada desapareceu sem deixar qualquer rasto. Enquanto tenta encontrá-la, Baxter descobre que se trata do

trisetneto de um magistrado inglês com o poder para viajar no tempo (Kobus “Mirth” Basson) e de uma empresa doméstica africânder com poderes sobrenaturais (Ester van Rensburg). Baxter acaba também por descobrir que, para viajar no tempo, Mirth usa um de dois exosqueletos, os quais demonstram ser simultaneamente as prisões e os veículos de dois irmãos extraterrestres. Enquanto um dos irmãos possui a forma de um polvo, o outro tem a forma de um louva-a-deus. Claramente um romance de ficção científica, ainda que empregue também o sobrenatural, *Apocalypse Now Now* pode ser caracterizado como um romance pós-colonial, pois apresenta vozes silenciadas e frequentemente excluídas dos registos coloniais e históricos. Contudo, o romance também foca algumas das mesmas preocupações de carácter racista que caracterizavam o colonialismo, como, por exemplo, a miscigenação. Como tal, o presente artigo argumenta que, ainda que apresente aspectos pós-coloniais, *Apocalypse Now Now* apresenta igualmente aspectos que se podem considerar neocoloniais, o que justifica a pergunta colocada logo no título do artigo.

Palavras-chave: ficção científica, pós-colonialismo, África do Sul, Guerra Anglo-Bóere, miscigenação.

1. Introduction

Apocalypse Now Now (2013),¹ authored by Charlie Human, focuses on Baxter Zevcenko, a teenager who is searching for his missing girlfriend, Esmé. During his quest, Baxter discovers that he is the great-great-grandchild of a malevolent English magistrate with the ability to time travel (Kobus “Mirth” Basson) and of a helpless Afrikaner housemaid with supernatural abilities (Ester van Rensburg). To travel through time, Mirth uses one of two exoskeletons, which are simultaneously the cages and the vehicles of two brothers, shaped as a mantis and an octopus.

The story of the two brothers mentioned above is told by the Singer of Souls, a mysterious man that appears throughout the text and that allows

¹ At the beginning of the novel, the expression “now now” is explained: “Now now (adv.) A common South Africanism relating to the amount of time to elapse before an event occurs. In the near future; not happening presently but to happen shortly” (Human n.p.). Nevertheless, the title *Apocalypse Now Now* does seem to allude to the novel *Heart of Darkness* (Joseph Conrad, 1902) by referencing its adaptation, *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). While Charles Marlow witnesses the brutal treatment of the natives by white traders and is constantly told exciting stories about a Mr Kurtz, Baxter Zevcenko witnesses the cruel treatment of Cape Town’s magical creatures by those that work for Mirth, about which Baxter is also told several disturbing stories.

Baxter and Ester to meet momentarily.² Singing a song about the siblings, the Singer of Souls states the following:

At the beginning of time two brothers, the Mantis and the Octopus, travelled the depths of space searching for a place to call their own. They came upon a planet, untouched and virgin and they each claimed it for themselves. In order to settle the dispute they had a contest. Whoever could give birth to the best creations would claim the world for their own. (65)

The Singer of Souls resumed his song and sang of the creations of both brothers. Settled on Earth, the siblings commenced their competition. The Mantis started by shaping the Watu Makule, a tribe which consisted of wonderous creatures, and the Octopus rapidly recognized that he could not defeat his brother. Sympathising with his sibling, the Mantis suggested that he and the Octopus share the Earth and shape a different species, the Strange Ones or humans. After they were done, the Mantis retired and slept for millennia. Finding himself alone, the Octopus decided to create the Feared Ones, shaped as crows, and to demand that they hunt down the Watu Makule. Forced to find shelter in the shadows, the Watu Makule become the Hidden Ones. The Singer of Souls then stated:

When the Mantis awoke he was so enraged at the genocide inflicted upon his creations that he attacked his brother and for millennia the gods fought so fiercely that their fighting began to threaten the very Earth they so coveted. To save themselves the Watu Makule and the Strange Ones united to trap their own Creators in living cages to stop them destroying the Earth. (66)

The Singer of Souls stopped his song after saying that “the Feared Ones missed their Creator, and so the story continues, with the Feared Ones forever hunting down the Watu Makule and seeking a way to release their Creator”. After singing his song, the Singer of Souls added abruptly that “[o]ne day the gods will fight again and the world will be destroyed” (*ibidem*). The same prophecy is subsequently spotted on a piece published in the *South African*

² The Singer of Souls is capable of creating a bridge between the past, where Ester is, and the present, where Baxter is. This is the reason why he refers to himself as “the gateway between worlds”, additionally arguing that “[i]t is to me you come to speak to those that are distant from you in space or time” (228). The character thus grants the great-great-grandmother and the great-great-grandchild the permission to talk to each other temporarily. It should also be acknowledged that Ester and Baxter speak spontaneously to each other throughout the whole story, since their Sinner’s abilities allow them to invade each other’s dreams.

Military History Journal:³ "Two brothers arise from the womb, / Intertwined brethren of creation and destruction / The Mantis and the Octopus wrestle for supremacy / Children of Chaos and Children of Light balancing on creation's razor blade / The Glowing ones show the way to the vehicles which are the key" (142).

Throughout the tale, the reader realizes that Baxter's English great-great-grandfather, Mirth, was born of the blend of a Strange One with a Feared One, who are clearly regarded as evil, and that Baxter's Boer great-great-grandmother, Ester, is a Strange One, who are obviously perceived as good, with Siener powers,⁴ which were rumoured to be "a gift from God to help the Boer nation in their struggle against the English" (141). Because of his ancestry, the English Mirth could only control the exoskeleton that had the configuration of an octopus, which is particularly relevant, given that the figure of the octopus is regularly related to England. In order to be able to control the other exoskeleton (whose shape is also relevant, given that the mantis is commonly regarded as a divine creator in many of the myths of the San people of southern Africa),⁵ and therefore to dominate the world, Mirth had to have a child with someone who belonged to the Siener's bloodline, all of them Afrikaners. Thus, Mirth travelled back in time, intentionally met Ester in the wreckage of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and discreetly followed the development of their daughter and of their daughter's descendants, while waiting for one of them to reveal the required characteristics to control the Mantis. When Mirth realized that Baxter had the required attributes to drive the Mantis, he established contact with him without revealing his true intentions. By the end of the novel, Mirth teaches Baxter to control the exoskeleton of the mantis, although Baxter eventually decides to put an end to his great-great-grandfather's megalomaniac plans by killing him and by destroying both exoskeletons.

Apocalypse Now Now can be characterized as science fiction. In 1979, Darko Suvin defined science fiction as "a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction

³ *Apocalypse Now Now* clearly displays a fragmented character, blending Baxter's narrative with numerous fictional articles.

⁴ During the novel, the narrator discloses that every human can execute magic to a certain extent: "While we drive Ronin explains to me about magic. Apparently it's connected to genetics. While anybody can theoretically do any kind of magic, every genetic pool has a specific connection to their heritage, a Wyrrd, which gives them a predilection for a specific kind of hoodoo. The Xhosa are apparently good with air and sound magic" (172). As was acknowledged, some Afrikaners possess "the power of prophecy" and are, consequently, addressed as Sieners (Human 141).

⁵ Human made use of San mythology, additionally adding things that he thought about. In an interview, the author revealed that, "[r]ather than trying to faithfully depict every aspect of South African culture", he had "riffed off it [sic] and tried to create something that people from any part of the world could enjoy" (Freeman n.p.).

of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (37). While cognition is connected to the features of science fiction that encourage the reader to try to comprehend the strange world of a science fictional story, estrangement is related to the elements of science fiction that the reader recognises as different. As Adam Roberts put it, "[i]f the SF text were entirely concerned with 'estrangement', then we would not be able to understand it; if it were entirely to do with 'cognition', then it would be scientific or documentary rather than science fiction" (8). Suvin additionally coined the term *novum*, which is Latin for new or new thing. Science fictional stories typically feature a *novum*, such as what H. G. Wells' protagonist uses to travel through time in *The Time Machine* (1895), or a number of *nova*, such as the various technologies presented in *Star Wars*. "[T]hese *nova* are grounded in a discourse of possibility, which is usually science or technology", as Roberts explained (7). Acknowledging Suvin's definition, this article argues that *Apocalypse Now Now* can be perceived as science fiction, because it combines estrangement and cognition, and because it features *nova* such as the two exoskeletons described above.⁶

In addition to science fiction, *Apocalypse Now Now* seems to be related to postcolonialism.⁷ Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) has studied the similarities established between science fictional and colonial alien encounters. In the aforementioned work, the author stressed that the stranger and the strange land can be considered the central myths of science fiction and colonialism. While in science fiction the stranger and the strange land are respectively represented by extraterrestrial, technological, human-hybrid or otherwise aliens and by far-away planets, in colonialism they are conveyed by

⁶ Even though it is a science fictional novel, *Apocalypse Now Now* employs the supernatural. Throughout Baxter's uncanny trip, the Anansi (a West African trickster who is shaped as a spider), the Obambo (a Central African ghost) and the Tokoloshe (a Zulu sprite) show up. The combination of science fiction and the supernatural has been extensively studied in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* by Jessica Langer (2011) and in the special issue on African science fiction of the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*. In the introduction of the aforesaid issue it is stated that various African works are indebted to indigenous myth and folklore and are not incompatible with today's technologies. It is similarly suggested that these technologies are sometimes speculative. Three of a total of five articles of the issue actually analyse works where supernatural abilities associated with indigenous spirituality are amalgamated with technoscience. One of the authors of the articles even conceptualized this coupling as "jujutech" (MacDonald 268).

⁷ Elleke Boehmer's definition of postcolonial literature should be considered. According to the author, "*postcolonial* literature is generally defined as that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives". The author additionally argued that the terms postcolonial and post-colonial are different, given that the latter constitutes "a period term designating the post-Second World War era" (Boehmer 3).

others and by places that may or may not be populated by those others, often seen as savages. The author additionally argued that, although science fiction finds itself steeped in the stranger and the strange land, postcolonial science fiction hybridizes, parodies and/or mimics such myths. While the stranger signifies sundry types of otherness, the strange land signifies sundry types of diaspora and movement. However, Langer mainly focused on authors that come from previously colonized contexts. *Apocalypse Now Now*, on the other hand, is a cultural product written by an author that comes from South Africa, a settler colony whose populations descend primarily from European colonialists, representing as a result a colonizing rather than a colonized group. Nevertheless, the British domination of the Boers, the Boers' struggle for cultural recognition and political autonomy, and the novel's presentation of silenced voices suggest that *Apocalypse Now Now* could be characterized as a postcolonial science fictional novel (as is the case with some Québécois science fictional texts; cf. Ransom 291-312).

While it does contain some of the elements typically present in post-colonial works, the novel also focuses on some of the same concerns that characterized colonialism, specifically miscegenation. The concept was initially used to refer to the sexual union of white and black people. During the nineteenth century, there were various cases of relationships and marriages between men of European ancestry and black women, which led those that believed in the purity of races to worry "about the 'contamination' of their ruling race with the blood of the 'primitive' Africans", as Pramod K. Nayar put it (105). Additionally, there was the prevailing fear that white women would be raped by Africans, or, worse of all, have sexual intercourse with them willingly. In *Apocalypse Now Now*, the fear of miscegenation is not related to the sexual union of white and black people, but of Boers and British, as will be argued.

Acknowledging what has been previously addressed, this article will argue that, despite displaying a postcolonial dimension, *Apocalypse Now Now* features some of the same racist concerns that characterized colonialism, namely those related to miscegenation – hence the question posed in the title of this article. In order to argue what has been mentioned above, this article has been divided in five different parts, including this introductory section. The next section will attempt to ponder the colonial relationship established between Boers and British, as well as the novel's postcolonial character. The third part of the article will focus on late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Boer and British miscegenation, while the fourth section will analyse the menace of miscegenation in *Apocalypse Now Now*. Finally, the last part of the article will make some concluding remarks.

2. Boers, British and postcolonialism?

For strategic reasons during the French revolutionary wars, the British captured the Cape in 1795, dominating the Dutch. The British then set out to secure the Cape, despite the Afrikaners' dislike of British domination. Throughout the 1830s, the Afrikaners attempted to trek away from British authority, although they were promptly tracked down by their alleged persecutors. The Afrikaners, also addressed to as the Boers, earned to break with Britain and to establish their republics, which they managed to accomplish in 1852 (South African Republic) and 1854 (Orange Free State). While the Orange Free State managed to momentarily secure its sovereignty, the South African Republic saw its plans sink when the British subdued it in 1877. Following the ensuing first Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881), the British renounced their claim to the republic. Despite being previously defeated, the British attempted to annex the republics again in 1899. The ensuing conflict, which is known as the second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), come to a conclusion in 1902, after the republics agreed to surrender their sovereignty and to recognise the British Crown. Following the end of the conflict, the British pursued failed Anglicization policies, which additionally promoted the cultural and political oppression of the Afrikaners.⁸

Apocalypse Now Now presents the second Anglo-Boer War and its aftermath, although it does so through the voice of a severely exploited Boer woman. Baxter's dreams are regularly invaded by Baxter's Boer great-great-grandmother, Ester, who lived through the war mentioned above. During these moments, Baxter witnesses Ester's tragic story. While she was sixteen years old, Ester watched her family die at the hands of the British, and after the end of the war had to work for an English magistrate that harassed and harmed her. Eventually, Ester decided and managed to flee South Africa while carrying the magistrate's daughter. In one of these moments, Ester describes her life as the magistrate's housemaid following the death of her family: "My new life is one of solitude and hard work. [...] My father and everyone in the commando⁹ are dead. I know this, but it is difficult to come to terms with. Sometimes [...] I hear a male voice in the distance and expect the craggy, bearded face of my father to appear. But it never does" (Human 161). As a result of the novel's presentation of exploited voices such as Ester's, and

⁸ Christopher Saunders and Iain R. Smith examined the relationships established between the British and the Boers, in a style this article cannot strive for. Additionally, John Darwin assigned a chapter of *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* to the analysis of the Anglo-Boer animosity (217-254). Also significant is Robert Ross's study *A Concise History of South Africa* (22-90).

⁹ The Boer commandos were volunteer military units organized by the Boer people of South Africa.

given the British domination of the Boers and the Boers' relentless struggle for cultural recognition and political autonomy in the course of the nineteenth century, *Apocalypse Now Now* seems to align with a postcolonial agenda.

Nevertheless, the novel also seems to allude to the fear of miscegenation. Although it does not refer to the anxiety related to the sexual union of black and white people, it does suggest that there are serious downsides to the sexual union of Boers and British. Therefore, while the novel seems to contain some postcolonial characteristics, it additionally seems to contain some of the same racist fears and anxieties that characterized colonialism, namely those related to miscegenation.

3. Boer and British miscegenation

As was mentioned above, the British encountered diverse difficulties in controlling the Cape. Almost all the Boers abhorred British authority and, throughout the nineteenth-century, the British did not blend with the Boers. The British came chiefly from urban backgrounds and they soon settled in the towns, in which English was the leading language. The Boers belonged to an earlier style of emigration from Europe and they favoured activities such as farming. Therefore, there was barely any intermarriage between the British and the Boers. The Europeans settled in South Africa were thus ethnically separated into British and Boers (Saunders and Smith 599-601).

Following the discovery of diamonds (1867) and of gold (1886), a process of industrialization in the South African interior was prompted. Because the wealthy goldfields of Witwatersrand were located within the limits of the South African Republic, numerous British immigrants entered the territory, which led to the proliferation of stereotypes regarding the supposedly retrogressive Boers. The British high commissioner Alfred Milner (1845-1925) agreed with such stereotypes, and soon began to pressure the Boer President Paul Kruger (1825-1904) to improve the structures of the South African independent state, additionally pressuring the President to bestow political powers on the British that resided within the borders of the republic. In this way, Milner would be able to sweep aside the "mediaeval race oligarchy" that Kruger was believed to have set up (Headlam 234).

Despite pervasive descriptions of the Boers as primitive, others had different opinions. Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1920) represented the Boers as "a rugged and unconquerable Teutonic race", and Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) championed the "co-mingling between two nationalities whose blood and character were essentially compatible" (Bashford and Levine 276). Moreover, Lord Selborne (1859-1942), Milner's successor, stated that "the two principal Teutonic 'races' of South Africa - British and Dutch" should "overcome their historic differences". Selborne maintained that the mixture of the two

nationalities would be beneficial to the making of a new nation (Bashford and Levine 277).

As can be perceived by what was argued above, the miscegenation of Boers and British was a recurring theme throughout the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.¹⁰ The blend of the British and the Boers was regarded by the former as a positive thing, despite Milner's earlier dislike of the Boers. Therefore, it does not look like an accident that it is Mirth, the English magistrate, who aspires to mix the British and the Boers in *Apocalypse Now Now*. However, Boer and British miscegenation has apocalyptic consequences, as will be argued in the next section.

4. The menace of miscegenation in *Apocalypse Now Now*

Throughout Human's text, Baxter confesses that he possesses two conflicting natures, portrayed as the Crow and the Siener poles of his personality. The Crow in Baxter, related to the Octopus and to the British, is clearly narcissistic, Machiavellian and psychopathic. The Siener, related to the Mantis and to the Boers, is shown as thoughtful and caring. Baxter's potential to become predominantly evil, which means that the Crow side of him will take hold, is emphasized at the end of the book, after Mirth and Baxter have victoriously mastered the Octopus and the Mantis vehicles. Seeking to stop Mirth, Baxter drives the Mantis to a different dimension, dragging his ancestor along. As they arrive at an alternative Cape Town CBD, they rapidly realize that the city is covered in the banners of the Octopus brother, which seemingly suggests that Mirth ruthlessly rules the world. However, Mirth and Baxter promptly see Baxter's photograph next to the phrase "[h]elp your Supreme Leader to help you":

"You could have chosen anywhere in space and time and you chose a dimension where my plans have already succeeded," Mirth says. [...] A bus with a large advertisement plastered on the side drives past me. "I don't think this is quite the reality you're thinking of," I say. I use the Mantis limb to point to the ad on the bus. Mirth turns to see my stern bespectacled face staring back at him. "Don't be a non-playing character," it says. "Help your Supreme Leader to help you." Mirth turns back to me. "You?!" [...] "Perhaps you are more dangerous than I initially assumed," Mirth replies. I smile. "A lot of people make that mistake." (Human 277-278)

¹⁰ For further information regarding the miscegenation of Boers and British, see the study by Saul Dubow.

Because Baxter is a blend of both a Crow and a Siener, he possesses the extraordinary power to handle both exoskeletons and to fashion the world according to his own egotistical will. As Baxter acknowledges while controlling the exoskeletons, “[a]ll the power I’ve ever wanted is right here [...]. I see how easily it must have been to become Supreme Leader” (278). Given that Baxter can clearly imagine himself craving the control that compelled Mirth, he dismantles the exoskeletons. After defeating his ancestor, Baxter relinquishes the power which had been bestowed on him:

Think of smoking dark-chocolate-flavoured heroin cigarettes while inhaling pure sunshine through your pores and having sex with the entire world screaming your name in adoration and worship. Think of having that for eternity. That’s what having complete control of the Mantis is like. And then think of walking away from that. Impossible! Unthinkable! But that’s what I do. It’s not because I’m a good person. It’s precisely because I’m not a good person that I do it. If I keep the Mantis I won’t use it for good. Oh sure, maybe at first I’ll try to do good things. I’ll try for universal peace and all that, but pretty quickly my Crow side will kick and I’ll start being power-hungry and evil. A universe with Baxter Zevcenko as the Supreme Leader? Nobody wants that, least of all me. (283)

Because of his ancestry, Baxter had the ability to bring about an apocalypse. Only if no miscegenation between the British and the Boers had occurred would there have been no threat of a “South African Armageddon” or of an “Apocalypse Now Now” (280). Nevertheless, although he accepts to take the vehicles apart and despite SinerBax’s ultimate defeat of CrowBax (283), Baxter needs to perpetually negotiate with both of his natures. Before the conclusion of the book, Baxter does blurt out: “Perhaps being Supreme Leader wouldn’t have been so bad after all. Is it too late to change my mind?” (289).

5. Concluding remarks

This article has shown that, on the one hand, *Apocalypse Now Now* displays a postcolonial character. As was argued in the second section of the article, the Anglo-Boer War and its aftermath are presented through a voice that differs from those that are typically included in official colonial accounts or in standard history texts, specifically the voice of an exploited and silenced Boer woman. By representing a voice that would typically fall outside the purview of colonial and historical archives, the novel stresses the importance and relevance of such a voice and of others similar to it. On the other hand, the article has additionally argued that the novel mentions the fear of miscegenation by focusing not on the repercussions of the sexual union of

black and white people but on the apocalyptic consequences of the sexual union of Boers and British. Even though it does not allude to the type of miscegenation typically feared in colonial times, *Apocalypse Now Now* still stresses the menace of miscegenation. Therefore, the novel contains the same kind of racist panic that characterized colonialism, although it changes the parties. As a result, Human's work contains some postcolonial aspects, but it additionally contains what can be considered neocolonial elements.

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